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Early Days of the American Fern Society

E. J. WINSLOW

It is not especially fitting that I should assume the office of historian, as it was not until after more than nine years of the Society's existence that I became a member. And I find that not less than forty-four of the names on our membership roll have been there longer than mine. It is my hope that these disjointed fragments, recalled from the past in recognition of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the American Fern Society may be, as it were, a breaking of the ice, to be followed by contributions, perhaps from our three remaining charter members, or from some of the other forty or more who have "come down to us from former generations."

I began the study of ferns at about the beginning of the present century, and sometime early in 1902 discovered with some surprise that a flourishing society of one hundred or more members had been organized to promote this study. My dollar was promptly sent in and in due time I received a very cordial letter of welcome from Treasurer James A. Graves.

At the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Society President B. D. Gilbert wrote a "Historical Sketch of the Linnean Fern Chapter" which appeared in the Fern Bulletin for October 1902. This article contains the following account of the origin of the Fern Chapter,

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as it was then called. "Early in 1893, Mr. Willard N. Clute, Mr. J. A. Graves, Mrs. A. D. Dean and Mrs. T. D. Dershimmer, all lovers of ferns, but not at that time skilled students of them, conceived the idea of starting a chapter of the Agassiz Association for the scientific study of ferns by correspondence. The charter was held open during the summer of 1893, and by autumn there were nineteen members with which number the Chapter started. At first there was no published Bulletin to disseminate the knowledge gained, but written notes were circulated by mail among the members. This plan, however, was not found to be very satisfactory and in July, 1893, the first number of an exceedingly modest little pamphlet was published, bearing the inscription; "The Linnean Fern Bulletin, No. 1. Published by the Linnean Fern Chapter. Price Five Cents. Binghampton, N. Y., 1893."

The Bulletin was edited throughout the twenty years of its existence by Mr. W. N. Clute, the first president and the leading spirit among the founders of the Society. It grew to be a noteworthy publication, and its periodical appearances were landmarks in the history of the Society during many years.

The fifth number of the Bulletin contained the constitution of the Chapter. That the makers of this constitution did not foresee the world wide expansion to which their organization was destined is evident from the following section. "Art. III, Sec. 3—Applications for membership must be made to the Secretary, who shall give notice to all members in good standing of such application and request a vote thereon. Two adverse ballots shall exclude."

Among the contributors to the early numbers of the Bulletin were, besides the four founders above mentioned, C. E. Waters, C. F. Saunders, A. J. Grout and others whose names are familiar to many of us. The number

for July 1896, contained an account of the discovery of *Aspidium simulatum* by Raynal Dodge with Plate i, a drawing of this newly discovered fern. In the same number was a paragraph on *Aspidium cristatum* \times *marginale* by Geo. E. Davenport. With the issue for July 1898 began A. A. Eaton's series of articles on the Equisetums. This ran through seventeen numbers and with the accompanying distribution of illustrative material, was one of the notable events of the history of the Society. Perhaps a matter of still greater popular interest was the series of fern floras of the states. Beginning in January 1903 with the flora of Louisiana by W. N. Clute and R. S. Cocks the series continued with Texas by Julian Reverchon, Iowa by T. J. and F. L. Fitzpatrick, Washington by J. B. Flett, New York by B. D. Gilbert, California by S. B. Parish, Florida by A. H. Curtiss, Kentucky by Sadie F. Price, Montana by T. J. Fitzpatrick, Georgia by R. M. Harper, Vermont by W. W. Eggleston, Connecticut by C. H. Bissell, Ontario by A. B. Klugh, Maine by Dana W. Fellows, Ohio by Lewis S. Hopkins, Pennsylvania by W. A. Poyser, Indiana by F. C. Greene, Michigan by C. K. Dodge, and Illinois by E. J. Hill.

The establishment of a Society Herbarium was first suggested by A. A. Eaton in his address upon assuming the presidency in 1899. He assumed the work of Curator and continued it until his death ten years later, when our present Curator, L. S. Hopkins, was appointed. So there have been but two occupants of this office in twenty years.

In June, 1903, I attended a meeting of the Josselyn Botanical Society in Skowhegan, Maine. At this time the Bulletin was running a series of photographs and short biographical sketches of well known fern students. And so it happened that I was able to identify a gentleman whose keen spectacled eyes were constantly search-

ing from the car window the banks and pools along the railroad as we journeyed toward our place of meeting. It was A. A. Eaton, who was on the program for an evening lecture on the New England Ferns. At the Skowhegan meeting I also made the acquaintance of Dr. Dana Fellows, a former vice-president of the Chapter, Mr. E. B. Chamberlain, for many years past the mainstay of the Moss Society, and several others whom I now count as old acquaintances.

Eaton had recently named *Botrychium tenebrosum* which he described as a species and vigorously defended in the pages of the Fern Bulletin against the attacks of Geo. E. Davenport who insisted that it was a form of *B. matricariaefolium*. During the social hour following his lecture some of the lady botanists playfully rallied him upon his temerity in opposing so high an authority as Davenport. Eaton replied modestly, expressing great respect for Davenport's knowledge of the subject, but adding that he could not disregard the facts as he found them.

A year or two later Eaton visited me in Vermont, where he had gone to look for certain orchids. And I called upon him several times at his home in North Easton, Mass. to get his help on some fern problems. He was working upon a revision of the genus *Isoetes* at this time and had several species growing in pots in the doorway.

He used to correspond by postcard in a telegraphic style designed to condense much into a few words. On a card dated June 12, 1905, he writes, "Found simplex in a meadow of *Ophioglossum* here. Surprised. Thought it grew in dry ground. But I am of opinion Dr. Robinson is right and *tenebrosum* is ecological form of simplex. Though to tell the truth it is hard to reconcile all differences."

Much of my talk and correspondence with Eaton had reference to the various forms of *Nephrodium*, as we

were calling them at that time,—the odd spinulosums, Clintonianums and Boottiiis. "They constitute the most interesting problem in New England ferns," he declared. When I visited him in the Massachusetts General Hospital, during his last illness, he said, "Some New York fellows have been describing some of those Nephrodium forms as hybrids."

At about the same time with the *Botrychium tenebrosum* controversy there appeared in the Bulletin a new phase of the irrepressible conflict between old Britain and young America in the form of a discussion between Mr. Chas. T. Druery of London and Mr. Clute on the comparative value of the American method of fern study and the British, which consists largely in seeking out and propagating sports or horticultural varieties. Although this discussion was brief, it was indelibly fixed in our minds by Clute's two-headed rabbit simile, which immediately took rank as a classic in fern literature.

In the year 1907, the Society lost three of its most valued members and most eminent fern students by the deaths of B. D. Gilbert, L. M. Underwood and Geo. E. Davenport. Gilbert had been president of the Fern Society, and endeared himself to many of us beginners by his enthusiasm and lively interest in whatever problem we submitted to him. Davenport was vice-president in 1902. Underwood, as the author of the manual of Ferns and Fern Allies, was perhaps the most widely known authority on the subject in America.

In 1910 it was decided that the Society should own and control its official publication, and the American Fern Journal, which had been started by Mr. R. C. Benedict, was adopted. This move was the subject of considerable controversy, but the event seems to have justified the venture. During the year 1911 the growth in membership exceeded that for any other year in the history of the Society. And though the four years of

the war have been unfavorable to the peaceful pursuit of fern lore, we have maintained our number somewhere near the 275 mark.

With twenty-five years of our development passed into history, we have a body of memory and tradition worth cherishing. And if the recently suggested plan of reprinting the early numbers of the Fern Bulletin should prove feasible it would be of a fitting celebration of the opening of our second quarter century.

AUBURNDALE, MASS.

Ferns of the District of Columbia¹

WILLIAM R. MAXON

The flora of the District of Columbia, first brought to familiar notice by Ward's classic "Guide to the Flora of Washington and Vicinity,"² has to an unusual degree the interest always attaching to the plants of a limited region in which more or less definite life zones meet. This interest is reflected in the ferns and their allies.

The area adopted by Ward and by later botanists for the "District flora" is a circle of 15 miles radius, with the Capitol as its center. This includes the city of Washington, which is coextensive with the present District of Columbia, and very much more territory in adjacent parts of Maryland and Virginia. Roughly bisecting this territory obliquely, northeast and southwest, is the so-called "fall line" or common boundary separating the Coastal Plain and the lower foothills of the Piedmont Plateau, two regions which both geologically and physiographically are widely different throughout their whole extent along the Atlantic Coast,

¹ Published with the permission of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

² Bulletin 22 of the U. S. National Museum. 1881.